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*TESTIMONY OF GEORGE YASKA OF TANANA CHIEFS CONFERENCE
TO THE SENATE INDIAN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
APRIL 17, 2002*

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee. My name is George Yaska. My comments today reflect the position of the Tanana Chiefs Conference. The Tanana Chiefs Conference is a consortium of forty-two (42) tribes located within the Doyon region along the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers. The Yukon spans a distance of more than a thousand miles through the region. There are seventeen (17) Conservation System Units located within the region, including National Parks and Preserves, National Recreation Areas and National Wildlife Refuges. The area is roughly the size of Texas. Tribes and other fishers and hunters use much of these lands to harvest resources.

We state these facts in order to explain a part of the problem with subsistence management today. The land is so great that it seems that there is not enough for everyone and, of course, this is not true. Although managing agencies maintain a strong program and subsistence hunters harvest plenty of predators that help to produce a viable moose population, the country cannot keep up with demand. A similar situation existed with

Chinook salmon until the recent downturn into the current poor production regime. Eighty percent (80%) of king salmon were harvested commercially at the mouth of the Yukon so that most of the kings didn't make it up to subsistence users further up the river. Commercial and sport use of moose and Chinook salmon has long over-shadowed subsistence uses within the interior and we have never has a true subsistence priority. We have worked for more than fifty years to establish bountiful resources for all user groups but we do not realize the benefit. Additional resources only insure additional sport and commercial users. It has seemed that subsistence users have ended up within nothing but left-overs for the past few years. If tribes were in a stronger position to assist in the establishment of management regimes and regulations to manage resources, we could work towards both a bountiful resource and a truer subsistence priority. As long as other user groups outnumber subsistence users, this problem will remain. We respectfully request that this committee begin to review possible avenues for solutions.

Tanana Chiefs has long been involved in efforts to co-manage fish and game and our efforts continue today. We appreciate the efforts of Congress to help the AYK Coalition in its' investigation of the causes of decline in certain salmon species in Alaska. Poor production may be related to a coccolithiform bloom or sterile zone in the upper trophic regime within the

Bering Sea. High water temperatures within river drainages have also complicated the management picture. We have weathered previous difficulties and we thank you for your efforts to see us through this latest problem.

We are working with subsistence users to assist the USF&WS and the Alaska Migratory Waterfowl Council with the implementation of the migratory waterfowl treaty. The group is considering the rules that will establish the spring hunt in Alaska, particularly within our region. Tribes will be finalizing metes and bounds description of their hunting areas around their community and proposing opening and closing dates. They may also get an opportunity to work on similar issues as we approach the season next spring.

Koyukuk River villages have formed a co-management team that has proposed to the USF&WS a contractual relationship with the Koyukuk and Kanuti National Wildlife Refuges. The team formed several years ago and they have done an outstanding job to date in assisting refuges in completing its mandate for public lands management. They can see shortfalls in the regulatory scheme that are not easily apparent to the average manager. These shortfalls often present substantial difficulties for hunters and better

management could clean these up quickly. In order to solve several of these problems, they have proposed to conduct visitor center operations, habitat assessments, wildlife enumeration and participate in key refuge planning efforts.

Tanana Chiefs has also pushed managing agencies to form joint working groups to solve particular problems in wildlife management. We advocate that all user groups and affected parties participate in these groups. Our wildlife problems usually extend themselves over many land boundaries and conflicts can become major headaches with so many parties without a working group. However, there is not a mandate that compels agencies to work together in this type of group to resolve complex management issues.

We are just now developing a working definition of co-management with agencies within our region. Non-BIA agencies within the DOI are still getting used to the fundamental issues found within the Indian Self-Determination and talks regarding these issues sometime proceed very slowly. This may compel us to seek your assistance when the situation warrants such discussion. However, we have found this to be a rare practice. The term “working groups” was founded, for application in Alaska, within ANILCA. These groups have brought back to life many areas within our

region that were thought to be no longer viable. This is one of the most valuable practices for managing agencies. We can see now situations that cry out for working groups but there is no mandate that would compel agencies to participate in such discussions. So we offer a little more light on the subject of co-management and the importance of a true subsistence priority. We thank you for this opportunity. I remain open for questions and comments. Thank you.